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ABSTRACT

The college speech communication classroom can serve as a laboratory for rhetorical theory and criticism. Applying the hypothesis of "experimental persuasion" to the study of oral expression, an instructor can promote in his/her students the development of story-telling skills of concrete depiction, dramatic action, the elements of identification, and so on. Using the metaphor of the mind of the speaker as computer, students can learn about the essentials of effective speech communication: (1) subject; (2) audience; (3) style; and (4) persuasive process. A third hypothesis relevant to speech instruction involves rhythm, a neglected concept, especially in its semantic and thematic guises. Through student speeches in class, students and instructors alike can learn lessons about the rhythm of language which would not be detected simply by reading the speeches. The basic communication classroom can contribute enormously to the research programs of its teachers, and such scholarly inquiry makes the class a far more valuable experience for students as well. A shift in society to a greater media orientation may engender greater inquiry and innovation within the basic communication course. (Twenty references are attached.) (SG)

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# The Research Agenda and the Basic Course in Communication

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Two years ago in New Orleans I presented a paper arguing that the speech classroom ought to be regarded as the principal laboratory for "doing" rhetorical theory and criticism (Haynes, 1988a). The paper maintained that "speech classrooms are often the only laboratories available to the theorist of effective speech, and they are practical laboratories where each student experiments with his or her own mental equipment." Further, the paper suggested "that the endurance and spread of a new paradigm comes not just from its ability to defend against its detractors' assaults but also from whether or not it can join the daily routines of the academy, especially the routines of the classroom and laboratory" (p. 2). In sum, that paper was intended to encourage us all to try applying new theory in the basic course. The case of narrative theory as an alternative to Aristotle was particularly to the point and I felt that developing practical applications in the classroom would go be a significant move toward the paradigm shift that looms ever larger on our horizon.

Although the debate in our journals between Professor Fisher (1987) and others has died down in the last year, the paradigm

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shift remains, at least in my view, inevitable. The reason the paradigm shift is inevitable is that the dominant media of communication in this society are shifting from print to an electronic, or "vid-oral" base (see Haynes, 1990a). With the media shift come predictable changes in the media conditioning--and thus in the expectations and responses--of audiences. These changes are quite significant. Their effect on the nature of contemporary rhetorical behavior is profound. Three of these changes, as hypothesized, tested, and applied in the basic course, are the subject of this paper. Hopefully, one result will be to encourage other basic course teachers to take their own research agendas and follow suit.

## Three Researched Hypotheses

First, a bit of editorializing. Do understand that, for most of my career, I have been a department of one. I do not suffer the demands of committees who want standardization among sections or insist on helping me select my textbooks. I would argue strongly that the fiats deriving from such committees, while doubtlessly to the advantage of administrators, impinge mightily on academic freedom and academic quality. Even when it comes to the matter of keeping a watchful eye on fledgling teaching assistants, I would argue that engendering a sense of pride in innovation and development of personal teaching style are sufficiently important aspects of the graduate--and

undergraduate--experience that administrative convenience should gladly take a back seat to such goals. With this caveat in mind, I want to illustrate how teaching the basic course can work hand-in-hand with a personal research program.

The three research hypotheses to be covered are called experiential persuasion, the oral computer metaphor, and the oralist rhetorical canon of rhythm.

## Experiential Persuasion

Experiential Persuasion is a concept that evolved through my dissertation work some ten years ago. At that time, Edwin Black had written a paper in which he illustrated and called for more study of "phenomenal" rhetoric as contrasted to the propositional rhetoric to which we are all accustomed.[1] In my dissertation (1982), an extended criticism of television commercials, I began to realize what now is commonplace: that the expensive, high-quality nationally-aired spots rarely rely on propositional reasoning to persuade. Instead the modern commercial simply simulates a particular kind of experience and associates it with the commercial's intention. Such experiences can be positive, either associating some new and unrelated notion or amplifying some desireable quality, or negative, fusing some undesireable consequence with the absence of the client product. The persuasive mechanism is simply that by which an audience assigns meaning: the store of experience that is altered by the

commercial in an appropriate way.

A rhetorical critique exemplifying this phenomenal rhetoric was published in a 1988 article in QJS (Haynes, 1988a). Charles Larson (329, 354) further elaborated on it in the 5th edition of Persuasion: Reception and Responsibility and, more accurately, I think, he calls it "experiential" persuasion. Professor Larson and I were on a panel exploring the topic at Central last Spring and the term appears several places in the current SCA program. I hope it catches on.

Elsewhere I have suggested reasons why the traditional speech course is mired in writing-based (as opposed to speech-based or electronic-based) assumptions about its subject matter (1989, 112-113). I recognize also that most speech teachers are highly concerned with teaching that bastion of writing-based thought, critical thinking, and, along with most humanities faculty, I share their concern. But we live less and less in a writing-based world. Often, in an attempt to be sure that critical thinking gets taught, (in case the historians and and philosophers and composition teachers blow it), our courses (and theirs as well) become almost obsessively focused on argumentation, and especially on the analysis of propositions. From a media studies perspective, critical thinking--especially this propositional sort--is a writing-based, rather than a speech- or vid-orally based, activity and I think speech courses should lean not so much away from writing but toward speech and

vid-orality. Besides, think how happy this will make our colleagues in those other disciplines!

So what I have done is to develop a pedagogy for teaching vid-orally based persuasion (1989, 120-123; 1990a). If a television commercial can alter behavior by simulating an experience that affects the meaning the audience will assign to an idea, so can a speech. Speech, historically, was used for many millenia in roughly that way--the cooperation of an oral community is induced through shared participation in a mythos repeatedly narrated and psychomimeticized-which is to say experienced--among its members. The vid-oral pedagogy thus focuses on the development of story-telling skills: concrete depiction, dramatic action, the elements of identification, and so on.

Interestingly enough, the principle difficulty students have with this pedagogy is with finding appropriate stories to support their intentions. The skills of storytelling have such ready practical application in their lives that t' ~v soak them up like sponges: the "sophomore BS syndrome." More to the point, with every student speech given via this pedagogy, come new affirmations, new questions, and new dimensions to experiential persuasion that have yielded a rich trove of research material.

Most notable is the issue of critical response to this sort of persuasion. How is the consumer to protect her/himself from a form of persuasion that happens too quickly (at least in its

broadcast video form) for effective propositional analysis and, by the way, does not rely on premises to induce cooperation anyway? There may be no firm answer yet, but, with this pedagogy, comes ready access to the phenomenon in question.

As students practice experiential persuasion on each other, penetrating response do develop and the faculties involved become more evident as time goes by. I hope to report on the issue at some future basic course panel. For now, some clues to think about: Chesebro (1984) stresses the right- brained aspects of vid-oral communication and predicts that "relational rather than analytical skills should be emerging among those children raised in the television era" (124). Elsewhere, Brummett (1984) notes that a "rhetorical theory is a form, pattern, or recipe, a statement in the abstract, of how a person might experience a rhetorical transaction" (103). So, how can relational skills cope with persuasive messages? That's a fascinating research question and the use of a vid-oral pedagogy in the basic course classroom provides ample opportunity to investigate it.

## The Computer Metaphor

A second media-shift change I have researched in the basic course has to do with growing recognition that the conscious mind simply cannot process all that goes on while it is engaged in communication. My institution is primarily an engineering school and our students tend to be more than casually acquainted with

computers. As a media studies scholar, I have long been annoyed by the persistent myth that public speaking, at its best, should be some sort of performed writing. My colleagues in English, for example in their technical writing classes, require that students make what they call "technical presentations" from technical papers they have written--the exercise amounts to converting the paper to a more oral style, then attempting to present the paper as if the writer were simply talking extemporaneously.

What should be most irritating to speech people about such an approach is that it encourages students to, and I am quoting Plato's Socrates, "entertain the delusion that they have wide knowledge, while they are, in fact, for the most part incapable of real judgment" (Phaedrus, 275). Students are taught, in effect, that it is perfectly acceptable to deceive an audience into believing the speaker knows what he or she is talking about when, in fact, they quite likely know very little. The media studies perspective leads us to ask, "if writing-based thought leads to a belief in 'performed writing,' what should a vid-oral view of public speaking be about?" One answer has been to develop and put into use a computer-like model of speech composition (Haynes, 1987).

It is best to avoid quarrelling about the perils of comparing electronit computers to human minds. The only claim one needs to defend is that the computer metaphor works well for engineering students. I presented a version of the model at SCA

several years ago and will only outline its current state very briefly. To use the model, my students begin by assuming that the properly functioning human mind-computer is already programmed to make the best choices it can of what to say or not say at any moment, limited only by clarity of intentions and access to information. Then we ask what information a computer would need to compose appropriate speech. The answer yields four data bases: Subject, audience, style, and persuasive process. To take full advantage of this computer, the student must carefully gather and load the data, give the computer time to function out of awareness (i.e. incubate), and then create a working file by practicing an imaginary speech over and over. No attempt at conscious recall is to be made. Each time the speech is rehearsed, it will change. The more versions "loaded into the working file," the better. When time for the actual event arrives, the speaker simply speaks, allowing the computer to direct his/her senses automatically, gathering relevant feedback to guide selection from the working file. The result, rather than performed writing, is genuine speech and a level of speaker-audience intimacy that is light years beyond any writing-based imitation.

Again, my hypothesis in this second endeavor is generally about the effects of media orientation on speech and the relative merits of various speech preparation methods. In a larger sense, the subject of investigation is the nature of communication in a

post-print world.

The Oralist Canon of Rhythm

For a third example of how basic course activities can feed into the research agenda, let us consider the concept of rhythm. Elsewhere I have argued the significance of parallels between the new electronic media and communication in oral cultures (1989). In pursuing this line, I have tried to identify and group the various characteristics both worlds share and they seem to fall into three categories which I label narrative, communality, and rhythm.

Rhythm is our focus here. First, consider what oralist scholarship has to say about rhythm. Walter Ong, for instance, notes that "at the neurological rather than the psychological level, versification or any kind of heavy rhythmic design is a formulary device: the beat itself is a kind of abstract fixity which can lend itself to various word groupings" (289).

Eric Havelock has more to say: "Acoustic rhythm is a component of the reflexes of the central nervous system, a biological force of prime importance to orality. Very early, it introduced a secondary effect, by encouraging a supplementary habit of semantic rhythm, or balancing of ideas (or better, balancing of 'notions,' since 'idea' is a literate term). . . It is arguable that in its various guises rhythm (rather than the "emptying and filling" of the Platonic formula) is the

foudnation of all biological pleasures--all the natural ones, sex included--and quite possibly of the so-called intellectual pleasures as well. However that may be, its linkage to music and dance and its involvement with the motor responses of the human body seem indisputable. Accordingly, oral societies have commonly assigned responsibility for preserved speech to a partnership between poetry, music, and dance" (72).

So with these notions in mind, what of rhythm in contemporary communication? Certainly electronic media have the capacity to overlay messages with acoustic rhythms. Certainly classical rhetoric did treat rhythm briefly in this acoustic way: Aristotle notes that any speech must have rhythm but no meter" (III, 1408b), and Cicero lists among the qualities of the orator, that he "produces in his language a sort of rhythm and harmony; who speaks . . . gracefully"(III, XIV). But beyond this acoustic notion, Havelock's "balancing of notions" and "semantic rhythms" are especially intriguing.

Furthermore, the recent McLuhan books (1988, 1989) have much to say about resonance, resonant intervals, and the resonance between visual and acoustic space. This last may push the idea of rhythm even farther than it is presently useful to go. But how does rhythm come into play in the modern vid-orally conditioned audience? Experience in the basic course leads me to believe the answer must be "profoundly." Let me illustrate.

Once, in an introductory speech class, a younger and usually

very quiet student gave a surprising speech. Her thesis concerned the problem of college students stereotyping local residents, the "townies," and she began by reminding everyone that she had attended the local high school where, in addition to the "goat-ropers" who gave rise to the townie stereotype, there were at least four other categories of people: "stoners, jocks, brains, and just plain partiers."

Insulated within the college community, students often missed seeing this diversity, she said, as well as missing much else in the life of the town. The speaker narrated brief stories of "good" things the audience probably hadn't heard about, the achievements and benevolences and even small heroics of her former classmates. She regretted that we probably had heard some of the "bad" things: occasional acts of violence and crime, and of a major drug ring arrested not long before. Thirdly, the speaker noted that the audience probably hadn't heard much of the sad things that occasionally happened.

There had been a terrible automobile accident one summer in which five of her classmates were killed. As the speaker unfolded this tragic story, the audience could not help but gradually sense her struggle to avoid tears. At length, she described a community memorial service and recalled how everyone, regardless of social background, had cried together in the gymnasium of the High School. At this point, the speaker was overcome and momentarily left the room.

The audience could hear her trip to the water fountain down the hall and we waited, sharing a rare and powerful experience of beautiful intimacy. Soon the speaker--of small stature but now revealed to be of enormous heart--returned. Chin up, she bravely continued by reading a brief memorial dedication from her school yearbook.

But the point she wanted to make was about the diversity that was thoughtlessly hidden in the "townie" stereotype. With a waver in her voice, this young woman looked out at her listeners and said that, yes, those five teenagers who died were all townies. "But one," she said slowly, "but one was a goat-roper, one was a jock, one was a brain," she paused to catch her breath, "one was a stoner, and one was a just-plain-partier." There was, of course, not a dry eye in the room.

The thematic echo was predictable, even formulaic, and all the more powerful for being so. With the first line of the conclusion, "one was a goat-roper," every member of the audience began to silently participate in sounding the rest. Despite having heard it for the first time only minutes before, they all knew it and struggled just as an oral community struggles in the shared process of psychomimetic recall. At the end, every mind chorused and every throat swallowed hard. "One was a just-plain-partier."

Now, if you are starting to protest that this example is nothing more than an effective use of repetition, perhaps you are

correct. One can find in Blankenship, for instance, or Corbett, advice that could easily be construed as that which my student heeded. But if so, rhythm is a greatly neglected figure, especially in its semantic and thematic guises. The power of semantic as well as acoustic rhythm is an oral rather than a written quality. To simply read a manuscript version of that speech would be unlikely to produce a significant response. In fact, this last anecdote was part of a manuscript that produced ho-hum responses from several journal reviewers. But to hear it, even by way of second-hand description, is a moving experience, is it not?

My work with rhythm is far from done but this third case is intended to show that basic course events can provide not only a laboratory to experiment with theory and pedagogical methods, but also, the basic course can yield richly heuristic critical matter for communication research.

## Conclusions

So, in conclusion, I have tried to illustrate in this paper ways that the basic course can contribute enormously to the research programs of its teachers. I think the examples demonstrate also that it is important for college speech teachers to be researchers--whether research is part of the job description or not. Indeed, we may realize that, as long as a

teacher--not a textbook or a committee--prescribes what is to be learned, the speech teacher's research role is implicit. Especially in a field as dynamic and prone to change as speech-communication, an active process of scholarly inquiry by the teacher makes the class a far more valuable experience for all concerned.

I would like to think that the Basic Course interest group will increasingly adopt within its perspective, a recognition that media orientations in our society are rapidly shifting and that with them shift fundamental aspects of the oral communication process. Further, I hope this perspective will engender the notion that innovation and inquiry within the bounds of the basic course rate a place in our goals above both administrative convenience and blind obeisance to tradition.

FOOTNOTE

[1]My copy was undated and marked as a draft.

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